CHAPTER I

The Early Years

Edward Charles Elliott was born in Chicago, Illinois, on December 21, 1874, the first-born of Frederick and Susan (Petts) Elliott. Frederick Elliott had been born in Ramsgate, England, on August 25, 1848; his wife, a year later on August 17. After having served as an apprentice blacksmith for seven years, he came to the United States in 1870 and worked at his trade in various cities and towns in the East and Midwest, returning to England in 1874 to marry Susan Petts on March 21 of that year. The two of them came back to Chicago within a few weeks and lived there for a little over three years. A second son, Fred, Jr., was born January 4, 1876.

In 1878 the family moved to Cedar Rapids, Iowa, where Mr. Elliott worked for the Northwestern Railroad. Two more children were born there to Frederick and Susan Elliott—a girl, Edith, and a boy, Frank. Edward started to school in Cedar Rapids in 1879 when he was four years old.

Then in 1881, the Elliotts moved to North Platte, Nebraska, where Mr. Elliott was a blacksmith and later a foreman in the Union Pacific shops. North Platte became their permanent home where the Elliotts lived (at 421 East Second Street) for more than fifty years.

The two youngest children died during the first year in North Platte, but in 1889 another son, Benjamin, was born. Fifteen years separated the eldest, Edward, from the youngest boy; but Edward and Fred, just a year apart, grew up and worked and played together with the other North Platte boys.

North Platte was a busy frontier town of perhaps fifteen hundred, largely populated with American and immigrant railroad workers and ranch hands. The Union Pacific Railroad, which had gone through only a few years earlier, was the largest source of
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employment; North Platte was an important rail junction point and railroad repair shops were located there.

To the boys, life in North Platte consisted of chores, ballgames, make-believe Indian wars, ice skating, snow fights, school, and more chores. "My early life was the customary one of the frontier described so well by William Allen White in his autobiography," Elliott remarked.

Even though vigorously active as a boy, Edward read everything he could get his hands on. His father was an avid reader and the boy learned to get great personal satisfaction from reading. "I had a much better background in English literature when I went to the university than my children did when they finished high school," he said in later years.

Elliott's father had no advanced education but he was interested and active in local politics and was somewhat of a leader in the local labor movement. His mother spent most of her time in the home. She was a devout Episcopalian and made sure that the boys went with her to most of the Episcopal Church functions in North Platte. Edward was baptized as an Episcopalian in North Platte and attended the Episcopal Church more or less regularly throughout his life but was never confirmed.

In later years, Elliott spent little time talking about his boyhood although he liked to tell of a visit to his grandmother's home in Ramsgate. In 1887, the year of Queen Victoria's Jubilee, the family had saved enough for a summer trip to England. Edward was twelve years old, unaccustomed to travel, and taking his first ocean voyage, yet the high point of the trip for him was a day spent in London to see a former North Platte resident, "Buffalo Bill" Cody, in his Wild West Show. Cody's home was on the outskirts of North Platte and the boys had played on the river near the house many times. Just a few years before, Edward had broken through the ice while skating near there and had dried himself before the fire of the famous buffalo hunter.

Because the Elliots were from his old home town, Cody showed them every courtesy and invited the family to dine with him in his private mess tent. Fred recalled that in the party were Cody's eldest daughter, Arta, and performers Annie Oakley and Johnny Baker. During the performance on the exposition grounds near London the Elliots sat on front row seats and nothing about the entire vacation was more thrilling to Ed and Fred.

In 1890 young Elliott was graduated from the three-year high school in North Platte; but that year the school board voted to
add a fourth year to the high school to qualify graduates to enter the university. He went back for another year (along with one other student) and was graduated from the four-year North Platte High School in 1891.

His studies in high school, he recalled, consisted of Latin, Greek, English grammar, geography, and mathematics, with textbook study (without a laboratory) in chemistry and physics. He felt that this early training in Latin and Greek accounted for his desire, amounting almost to a compulsion, for precision in both speaking and writing.

THE UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA

In the fall of 1891, Elliott went to Lincoln to attend the University of Nebraska where one of his selected freshman courses was chemistry. As he remembered it, the chemistry choice resulted largely from his respect and admiration for his high school chemistry instructor, M. H. Lobdell. He studied chemistry as an undergraduate major under Professor H. H. Nicholson, and was graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in 1895.

To make money to stay in college, Elliott worked off and on at the 46 Ranch, located a few miles east of town. The 46 Ranch was owned by Charles Hendy, a friend of Elliott's father who lived in the same block and worked in the Union Pacific Shops. The Hendy boys were close friends and playmates of the Elliott boys and they, together with two or three cowboys, worked the ranch in the summer. Bill Hendy was about Edward's age, but he served as foreman when the work got under way.

The main product of the ranch was hay with cattle as a by-product. During July and August the Hendy family largely took over the work of cutting the wild hay to serve as winter feed for the cattle. The days were long and hot, the work was hard, and the pay was small, but Elliott cherished those days all of his life.

In Elliott's scrapbook of college days are stirring accounts of inter-collegiate football which he followed with intense loyalty, as well as accounts of other events which were important to him. One clipping, for example, reviewed a performance of the classical play, Electra, offered by the Greek and Latin departments of the university in which "Miss Willa Cather looked pleasant and happy as Electra." When I called this item to his attention, he laughed and remarked that "Willie" (who later gained national prominence as an author) was one of 66 in his class who was graduated in 1895.
In his senior year, Elliott was an active member of the committee which planned the annual "Senior Promenade" and a few days later appeared in the Senior Class Day skit which "provoked much laughter."

Also in his final year he worked especially hard with the cadets in Company C of a cadet battalion. The Cadet Corps under Lt. John J. Pershing, who served as military instructor at the University from 1891 to 1895, was rigorously trained for the annual drill contest for the possession of the Omaha Cup. When the competitive drills were held in May 1895, Company C placed second and Lt. Pershing presented Elliott with the sword that had been used to drill the company during the year. It remained one of his prized possessions for fifty years until he presented it to Purdue University a few weeks after he had retired as president in 1945.

Elliott kept in occasional contact with Pershing during the years that followed his graduation and when Pershing retired in 1924, Elliott wrote to the General saying that he would always treasure the memory of Pershing "as a great teacher as well as a great leader." Elliott noted that Pershing's farewell message and President Coolidge's message of appreciation had caused him to be "more keenly aware than ever before of the great obligation which all of us have who were privileged to spend those four, unforgettable years with you at the University of Nebraska."

Pershing promptly wrote in reply, "Please permit me to say that your friendship and support have always been an inspiration to me, and to extend to you my warmest congratulations on your own services to our country."

Six years later Elliott visited with Pershing in his Washington office on the occasion of Pershing's 70th birthday. His admiration for Pershing continued for as long as he lived, and many times he commented that his own erect posture was a result of the training he had received under Pershing. When his own children slouched at the dinner table, he more than once said, "Sit up straight and get those shoulders back or I'll have to get a brace for you."

He was a strong proponent of physical fitness programs and took his simple "setting-up exercises" every morning, he said, largely because Pershing had once said to him, "Young man, you have a good body. Take care of it." The fact that he was an advocate of universal military training, as is detailed later, was surely almost entirely a result of Pershing's influence.
Elliott recalled that there were several outstanding men at the university during those years whose friendship meant a great deal to him. Along with Nicholson in the Chemistry Department was John White, who later was head of the Department of Chemistry at Rose Polytechnic for 34 years, and George B. Frankforter, later dean of the School of Chemistry at the University of Minnesota. During his senior year Elliott was an errand boy and messenger for Chancellor James A. Canfield, who afterwards served as president of Ohio State University and whose daughter, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, was a favorite of Elliott's.

Elliott had hoped to get a teaching position in a high school following graduation in 1895. He made applications at several schools but for various reasons did not sign a contract. At graduation he accepted a teaching assistantship with Nicholson for two more years. In June 1897, he was graduated with the degree of Master of Arts. Edward Everett Hale addressed the graduates.

Still hoping to teach, Elliott was looking forward to further study in Germany following the approved pattern of the times, but money was scarce. These were hard times in Nebraska and Elliott had no choice but to find a job.

Professor Nicholson assisted him in the search for a teaching position noting that Elliott was “a young man of most sterling worth and ability.” In his letter of recommendation he said that Elliott had “natural teaching ability of a high order; takes an interest in his work and in his pupils and, not only does he secure the best results from them, but also keeps a genuine respect.”

While investigating various job prospects during the spring of 1897, Elliott learned that there was a position open in the new high school at Omaha. He took the required examination in physics, chemistry, and mathematics, passed with distinction and was being favorably considered for the position by Superintendent C. G. Pearse when a Dr. Senter, an older man just returned from Germany with a Ph.D. degree, made application and got the job. It was a bitter disappointment.

Superintendent Pearse, who had made the decision not to hire Elliott, later went to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, as superintendent of schools and became president of Wisconsin State Normal School. Elliott enjoyed telling me that during his years in Wisconsin he and Pearse appeared together on many programs. Elliott, then a professor of education at Wisconsin, chided Pearse on several occasions about his failure to give him the job in Omaha. Pearse retaliated, with a smile on his face, by telling audiences that
Professor Elliott owed him money, since Pearse had forced him to move on. “If it hadn’t been for me,” concluded Pearse, “Professor Elliott might still be in Omaha, teaching science for the next forty years.”

Later in the spring of 1897, Elliott happened to chat with Professor C. E. Bessey of the Botany Department. As Elliott recalled it, Bessey suggested that he apply for a teaching position in the Leadville, Colorado, high school. Acting on Bessey’s recommendation, Elliott got the job and went to Leadville to teach science during the 1897-1898 school term.

LEADVILLE, COLORADO

Leadville, known all over the country in the late 1800’s as a prosperous mining town, had suffered economically by reason of the demonetization of silver in 1893. Whereas in the ’80s it had been a wild booming mining town of about 10,000 inhabitants, a disastrous strike had diminished prosperity and the population had declined in the years immediately following the government decree. Gone were most of the tents and temporary dwellings as were most of the gambling “hells” and saloons which had crowded the business section.

By 1897, however, a pronounced revival could readily be seen. As mining operations stabilized, the population began to grow again and the citizens evidenced a new interest in civic undertakings. Elliott recalled that the more stable elements of the population seemed to be gradually gaining control. Schools were important to people who planned to establish permanent homes for their children. In many respects it was a favorable time for a young man to accept a position in the schools.

Nevertheless this rough frontier mining town must have looked bleak and forbidding as Elliott arrived on August 30, 1897, during a driving snowstorm, riding in an open freight car with $5.00 in his pocket! The new teacher had been forced to transfer to the open freight car because a train wreck had torn up the track a few miles out of town.

Elliott obtained a single room in a private home and took his meals at a boarding house around the corner, patronized almost entirely by miners. He was twenty-two years old and “as green as they come,” he said.

He found that his laboratory equipment consisted of twelve bunsen burners in various states of repair. During that first year
Elliott worked diligently to build equipment so that his courses in physics and chemistry might include more than the minimum of laboratory experiments. He spent much of his free time fashioning crude but workable laboratory fixtures.

Elliott had little to say about that first year in Leadville except for three incidents, all of which happened during a single week in the spring of 1898.

In May 1898, he was invited to attend a party given by one of the socially prominent and brilliant ladies of Leadville, Miss Elizabeth Nowland, daughter of school board member and local publisher John Nowland. Elliott considered himself to be one of the “extra” young men in town and was happy to be able to attend the little party since he seldom was included in the local group this first year.

He never forgot the night; but only partly because Elizabeth Nowland later became Mrs. Elliott. On that particular Friday evening Elliott had stayed after school to help a student complete an experiment in photometrics. The darkroom consisted of a classroom corner enclosed in black draperies equipped with candles in hand-made bases, all constructed by the first-year teacher. Elliott left the student still working at 4 p.m. in order to get ready for the evening party.

At breakfast the next morning the boarding house talk was all about the bad fire at the schoolhouse the night before. Too excited to eat breakfast, Elliott ran over to the school to learn that the temporary darkroom had gone up in flames and a considerable amount of damage had been done to that section of the building before the flames were extinguished. Elliott was uneasy to say the least. He awaited the expected summons of the school board but it was not until the following Thursday that he was called to meet with the board members. The week had passed with agonizing slowness.

As he greeted the board, however, he could discern no antagonism, and after the amenities, the president of the board, Charles Cavender, announced that they had selected Elliott to serve as superintendent of schools for the following year with the generous salary of $1,500 per year. The fire was not even mentioned, and Superintendent Elliott left with his head in the clouds.

While there is little on record to establish the caliber of his teaching, there was evidence that the board members thought well of his work in the school. Within a few weeks, Elliott recalled, he was offered a job as a chemist at an Idaho agricultural experi-
ment station. Even though his training indicated that he was probably better qualified in chemistry, the higher salary offered at Leadville sold him on the job as superintendent of schools. During the summer he went back to the University of Nebraska to take some courses in education and followed this with some correspondence work under psychology professor Arthur Allin at the University of Colorado. During the next several years he continued his part-time study of education.

THE NEW SUPERINTENDENT

The Leadville school system, which included the high school and five elementary schools enrolling more than 1,500 pupils, was faced with organization, enrollment, and curricular problems which required constant study from an expert administrator. Elliott began his work with enthusiasm and immediately set about codifying the various rules and regulations which heretofore had not been recorded.

By June 1899, he had formulated a set of regulations governing the certification and appointment of teachers, followed by regulations governing the salaries and contracts of teachers. For the first time a salary schedule was established and the professional and scholastic qualifications of Leadville teachers were fixed by a definite system.

By July, a list of by-laws and rules and regulations had been meticulously prepared listing general rules and rules governing the duties of the superintendent, principals, teachers, pupils, and janitors.

The following July, Elliott sent the school board exhaustive outlines of the courses of study for the primary grammar schools and high school of the district. They were adopted by August.

This was routine administrative work; but the annual reports to the school board provide a rather complete account of the thoroughness with which he undertook to serve the mining community and present a remarkably clear picture of the principles and ideals which he developed during this formative period at Leadville.

Among other things, he was concerned with attendance and directed attention to the inadequacy of the compulsory attendance laws, but he was even more disturbed over the lack of proper accommodations. By 1903, he was insisting that many of the buildings either be reconditioned or torn down and replaced. Some of the buildings were totally unfit for school purposes, he said,
and various rooms in other buildings lacked suitable lighting and ventilation. Exasperated by the lack of sanitation, he once wrote “the present plan of providing drinking water to the pupils of the elementary schools is a relic of the days of school administration when the word sanitation was unknown.”

He pointed out that the facilities for providing drinking water consisted of two or three water pails, to which were attached by chains a half dozen or more tin cups. In some cases several hundred pupils were drinking water from these pails, providing in his words, “prolific sources of contagion among the school children.”

Leadville was no model of municipal cleanliness and neatness, he observed, but “if there is one institution in the community that should stand for cleanliness and the observance of those conditions of recognized hygienic and sanitary value, that institution is the public school.” He insisted that “the school cannot preach, cannot teach, cleanliness and that regard for personal hygiene as long as its practices are as they are.”

In December 1898, Elliott visited the state university in an attempt to have the three-year high school placed on the university’s accredited list. Professor Allin made a personal inspection of the Leadville High School, but refused to recognize the work of the school as equivalent to the university requirements for admission.

Elliott immediately renewed his earlier recommendation to the board that the high school course be lengthened to four years and the board responded with a favorable vote. Before the end of his first year in office, the taxpayers had voted to contract a bonded indebtedness of $45,000 for the purpose of purchasing a site, building and furnishing a high school building. The high school opened in September 1899 as a four-year high school with an elective system, and the new building was occupied in the spring of 1900.

During the first year the eighth grade was taught by high school instructors in the same building, but there were problems with this arrangement. So in May 1900, the eighth grade was incorporated as an integral part of the high school and the new high school course was for five years, the seventh grade marking the end of the elementary school course.

The new graduated salary schedule had raised the minimum salary to a living point and had done away with constant demands from the teachers for salary increases. Nevertheless, Elliott expressed concern over the fact that teachers were being paid
less than the common laborer in the community. One of his final appeals to the board was for higher teacher salaries. Pointing out that each year 25 to 30 percent of the Leadville teaching staff were new teachers, he said, “Is it to be marveled at that our high school teachers are continually leaving for better positions, when $1,000 is the limitation placed on their services?”

Elliott wanted good teachers and he was convinced that salaries had to be raised before he could expect to get the successful teachers that were needed.

The schedule of teachers’ meetings which Elliott directed was a rather heavy one in the light of present-day practices. During the school year 1898-1899 the entire faculty studied James’ psychology while the following year was devoted to the study of general teaching methods. Later yearly schedules consisted of special meetings at which papers were read by different teachers who had specialized knowledge or prominent school men of the state were invited in to deliver lectures on special topics. As a general rule these meetings were held at least twice, and sometimes three times, a month.

At the same time he was working to improve the faculty, however, he also made attempts to enlist the parents’ support of the work of the schools. In the fall of 1901 he sent a letter to parents asking their cooperation, pointing out that irregular attendance did not help the work in school. He also asked that parents discourage their children from attending social gatherings scheduled during the week nights because, “these diversions usually bring about a waste of energy and vitality needed for a proper preparation of school tasks.”

The letter raised no great amount of adverse criticism or comment from the school patrons apparently, although some parents were aroused to reply that these things were “none of his business,” Elliott recalled.

Even as he worked to build a better school system for Leadville, Elliott was also concerned with the office of the superintendent and the requirements of the position.

Speaking before the students at the Colorado State Normal School in Greeley on “The Relation of the Superintendent and the Teacher,” he noted that the fundamental duty of the superintendent was “to supervise, to direct methods of instruction, and to establish the standards of instruction.” The superintendent, he thought, should be “the educational expert, upon whom the
The progress of our schools and the solution of their problems is to devolve."

Elliott had had little opportunity to make a study of the administrative responsibilities involved in the superintendency, yet he was perhaps as well prepared for the position as any young man whom the board might have selected. At the turn of the century school administrative procedures had been the object of very little careful scientific study.

As it later developed, his decision to work as an administrator was a timely one, for the next few decades saw the development of an extensive movement to professionalize school administration. While Elliott’s views on educational matters at this early date were not always of consequence, they had some significance in that they indicated his immediate acceptance of parts of an educational philosophy which later gained widespread approval.

His repeated pleas for higher salaries for example, were in line with well-established policies. As early as 1835 the need for higher salaries for teachers had been emphasized, and the relationship between low salaries and incompetent personnel had been pointed out again and again. However, the fact that Elliott advocated some kind of a salary schedule, based on training and experience, is of more than a little interest. The establishment of definite salary schedules was largely a development of the twentieth century, and only since World War I has there been a rapid trend toward schedules based on training and experience.¹

Elliott further developed the idea of the superintendent as an educational expert and supervisor while he was at the University of Wisconsin.

TEACHERS COLLEGE

The thought of further education frequently recurred to Elliott during his six years at Leadville. The idea of professional schools of education was gaining nationwide recognition and one of the most prominent of these developing schools was Teachers College, which had been reorganized at Columbia University in 1898.

Professor James E. Russell, a colleague of Allin at the University of Colorado, had moved to Columbia University in 1897, and the following year was made dean of the newly-reorganized Teachers College. He, together with Professor E. L. Thorndike and Professor Paul Monroe, set out to recruit top young men in education for the new graduate school.
Russell learned of Elliott through the strong recommendation of Allin, and, during the summer of 1899 at a National Education Association Department of Superintendence meeting, Russell met Elliott and talked to him about coming to Teachers College. At that time Elliott felt that his financial situation would not permit his leaving Leadville.

Then in 1901, Professor John Dewey, who was attempting to build a strong graduate program in education at the University of Chicago, offered him a fellowship to start there in September; still Elliott could not afford to accept any offer.

But early in 1903 at an N. E. A. meeting in Cincinnati, Elliott was again interviewed by Professors Russell, Thorndike, and Monroe. They offered him a fellowship at Teachers College which he accepted within a few weeks after he had returned to Leadville.

Professor Allin's persistent urging had finally succeeded. He had been in frequent contact with Elliott because it was his job to inspect the public schools of the state for the university, and he had been encouraging Elliott to get further training. He was of the opinion that the Leadville schools, under Elliott's leadership, had made greater progress than had any other school system in the state. Impressed with Elliott's "clear foresight, able management, and scholarship," he considered Elliott "a first-class man and a first-class superintendent."

So Elliott spent the school year of 1903-1904 as an assistant in education administration at Columbia. The following summer he went to the University of Jena, Germany, (in part, at least, to prepare for the language requirement emphasized at Teachers College). There he observed work in the German schools and attended lectures by Professor William Rein. Later in the summer he traveled in Germany, Switzerland, France, spending part of the time with classmates Walter F. Dearborn and Ellwood P. Cubberley.

He closed out his trip by going to England to visit with relatives in London and Ramsgate. He could remember only a few of the things that he had seen there in 1887, he reported to his father, but uncles and aunts and cousins fed him "beefsteak pudding and apple dumplings" until he could eat no more. They talked with him for hours about his parents, their visit 17 years earlier, and life in the United States.

When he returned in the fall (sporting a handsome beard that he had grown during the summer) he began his second year at Teachers College as a teaching fellow. "That second year, when
I began teaching courses in administration for Professor S. T. Dutton, was when I made my final decision to work in educational administration," Elliott later recalled.

Elliott's work at Teachers College at this particular time has a special significance for students of education. With considerable effort the faculty at Teachers College had gathered a select group of promising students. Along with Elliott were Cubberley, who later served as a dean of the School of Education at Stanford from 1917-1933; Henry Suzzalo, who became president of the University of Washington and later president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching; George D. Strayer, who stayed on at Columbia as a professor of education for 38 years; Dearborn, who spent nearly forty years in the graduate school of education at Harvard; Bruce R. Payne, who served as president of the George Peabody College for Teachers from 1911-1937; and Junius L. Meriam, professor of education at the University of California at Los Angeles from 1924-1943.

These men all received their degrees in 1905. The famous series of Teachers College Contributions to Education began with this group. Meriam began the series with Number 1; Cubberley wrote Number 2; Suzzalo, 3; J. A. MacVannel, 4; Strayer, 5; and Elliott, 6.

Elliott's contribution was his doctoral dissertation, Some Fiscal Aspects of Public Education in American Cities. Much of this work was done under the direction of Thorndike, an acknowledged early leader in educational psychology, who was the first to apply the latest scientific techniques and methods to education.

Twenty years later Cubberley wrote that the early work in the application of statistical procedures to the study of educational problems began in 1902-1903. "The first fruits of this method, as applied to school administration, came in 1905," he wrote, "with the publication of two Teachers College doctor's dissertations, one by Elliott . . . and the other by Strayer . . . ."

Elliott recalled that while working on his dissertation, however, he had some disagreements with Thorndike and finally went to see President Nicholas Murray Butler to talk over the matter. Butler was a good listener and by the time the conversation was over, he had charmed Elliott completely; the problems with Thorndike no longer seemed to be major ones. It was the beginning of a life-long friendship, and Elliott thought that it may have led to his going to the University of Wisconsin.

Elliott happened to be in Butler's office in the spring of 1905 when Dean E. A. Birge and President Charles R. Van Hise of the
University of Wisconsin stopped in to see Butler about employing Teachers College graduates for positions at their university.

Van Hise and Birge were specifically looking to Teachers College to supply outstanding men for the work of training teachers for the rapidly growing public school system in the state. Butler gave an on-the-spot personal recommendation for Elliott which, of course, was later substantiated by the personal and professional recommendations of Russell, Thorndike, and Monroe.

Thus in the fall of 1905, Elliott reported to Madison as an associate professor in education, along with classmate Walter Dearborn, a newly appointed instructor in educational psychology.

NOTES